An elegy for the Great Auk

Review of *The Last of Its Kind: The Search for the Great Auk and the Discovery of Extinction* by Gísli Pálsson (2024) Princeton University Press

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This anthropological text covers the genealogy of the extinction of the Great Auk, a large flightless bird that made its home in the islands off the coast of Iceland until the mid-1800s. Gísli Pálsson takes the reader on a journey through time and place to capture the story. In his journeying we are introduced to Pálsson as his young self – a keen Icelandic birdwatching boy who later became an anthropologist. We also meet other scientists who had a fascination for the Great Auk (also known as the Gare Fowl), such as Alfred Newton the naturalist who, with his colleague John Wolley, penned earlier histories on the species.

Pálsson literally follows the research steps that Wolley and Newton undertook in 1858, when it was discovered that the birds were now extinct. Pálsson's main aim seems to be to alert twenty-first century humanity as to how easily extinction can happen, and the effect that extinctions have on the broader web of life, and ultimately sustainability. The brutality that these particular birds suffered is a disquieting but necessary read, if humans are ever to shift consciousness towards a more sustainable way of sharing the world.

Paradoxically, the book is both disturbing yet beautifully written and offers a broad audience (from science students to everyday citizens) a lesson about the 'discovery' of extinction. As an Icelander, and someone well acquainted with the research trail, Pálsson brings an intimate and authentic touch to this tragic exploration of one bird's extinction. In his very characteristic narrative voice that weaves facts, history and science with his own personal knowledge of the land

and its bio-cultural geography, this book is somewhat of a mystery thriller that knocks on the Icelandic door of memory, melancholia, remorse and reparation.

What we discover through Pálsson's extensive research and indeed the research that preceded him, is that the Auk's were already gone – extinct – once Wolley and Newton arrived in Iceland in the mid-1800s. They had intended to make the trip by boat to Eldey themselves, as this was the last known breeding ground for the Great Auk, but weather conditions prevented that expedition. In what was perhaps a stroke of genius, those two ornithologists instead met and spoke with the very people who participated in the 'last successful trip' to hunt the birds. These interviews spawned important historical information about who allegedly killed not only the last two Auks, but much of the whole species over time, as dictated by the lifestyle of a 'subsistence economy' (p. 154), culture over centuries, colonialism, the lure of reward from merchants, fame, and the abject vulnerability of birds that were flightless and easy to trap.

The situation for the birds became more precarious after the volcanic eruption of the Great Auk Skerry in 1830 that effectively upended their home and forced their migration to the Isle of Eldey, southwest of Iceland. Here, they became more accessible to humans, whose historic lack of insight and preservation resulted in the Auk's extinction. While the Great Auks may have been more accessible, the trip to Eldey was nothing short of intrepid and many sailors and hunters lost their lives over time in that pursuit. Others were affected lifelong by the brutal nature of the hunt.

We get excellent lessons in history and science in Pálsson's book, perhaps also some moral philosophy on injustices perpetrated by humans on nonhumans and the lexicon of extinction. It is at times an uncomfortable read, that demonstrates that in the nineteenth century the idea of mass extinction was simply unimaginable. It seems that the longevity of all species was assumed and there was no hint of danger to any one of them. Then we are told about George Cuvier's controversial 1812 publication that claimed evidence of forty-nine extinctions of vertebrates, the first known iteration in which the concept of extinction was declared as a fact (p. 5). This would have been a profound statement to make and contra to prevailing ideas about zoology and preservation of any species. Cuvier unlike many of his time, mentions women in his work and relays and acknowledges his dependence on 'fossil hunters' in order to make his scientific assessments. He particularly records the work of fossil hunter Mary Anning from Lyme Regis, who had a considerable reputation then and now for the information gleaned from fossils that contributed to the store of palaeontology knowledge and collections of artefacts. Cuvier also praises his daughter Sophia who sketched many of the birds for him. Such mentions of women in scientific work are unusual for the time. Pálsson too mentions women throughout as Icelanders, as fossil hunters, women as fishers, net menders, bird-

pluckers, adapting to life in the harsh climate of Iceland and providing what merchants so keenly sought (p. 112) to sell on to scientists and collectors alike. Women were also taxidermists and at times lead rowers in boats. He notes in particular Þurídur Einarsdóttir (1777-1863), who was a foreman [sic] on some of the boats and allegedly 'never lost a man to the sea' (p. 144).

We journey through the re-assembly of skin, bone and feathers by taxidermists to be displayed as curiosities at museums and in shows for entertainment. Once offshore, these re-assemblages were not always complete replicas of the bird and represent a crude moment in natural history and its commercial interconnections. In one instance, a collection of ten Auk eggs were found uncatalogued in a vault by Newton at Cambridge. Pálsson tells us squarely that in the absence of modern-day science ethics clearance in Victorian England, and any sense of moral responsibility, 'Ostensibly, the last great auks were killed for "science,"' (p. 112). Pálsson further explains the concerns of Wolley and Newton then, and our concerns now, that the extirpation and consequent loss of a species of any kind affects the whole web of life that is biosocial at its very core. 'Death piles up and spreads like fire, without necessary renewal' (pp. 198-200) he tells us in his affecting poetic tone, while drawing respectively on the work of Deborah Bird Rose (2017) and Donna Haraway (2008) who have covered similar terrain with different species and cultural geographies, and the precarity of more-than-human lives across the nature/culture spectrum.

The 'last successful trip' (in the short term) as it has been dubbed, heralded an extinction moment that would be repeated ad infinitum (in the long term) with other species, to the point where we find ourselves with several human induced mass extinctions in the twenty first century. While accounts vary, it is clear that some of those involved in that last expedition, were affected lifelong. Vilhjálmur Hákonarson owned the boat, and crewmen Jón Brandsson (1804-80), Ketill Ketilsson (1823-89), and Sigurður Ísleifsson (1821-89) went ashore to hunt the birds (p. 149). The description of this hunt is an uneasy read as are the descriptions of the massacres of thousands of birds in Newfoundland (pp. 36-39). Moreover, and deeply disturbing is that the cruel methods applied to trapping and killing the birds is an appalling testimony to what was considered normal practice at the time, with an oppressive colonial massacre mentality ever ghosting in the geopolitical background and recent past.

Upon finding a Great Auk egg, we are told that Ketill's head 'failed him' and he stopped. Why did this twenty-two-year-old stop from capturing the egg. "Was he suddenly dizzy, a coward, or was he responding as a moral being unable to do the deed?" (p. 151). Descendants of Ketill and the communities of the area, have had this story handed down to them in several iterations. Vífill Oddsson, for example, was told by his grandmother, 'never to shoot any living thing unless they could eat it'. She said of her father-in-law [Ketill] 'He was just there as a

youngster. He did not kill the last bird … Ketill did not have the heart to kill birds … Indeed, his head failed him' (p. 209). Or was it instead, his head that ultimately saved him?

On Pálsson's own journey he discovers that while the birds are over 150 years gone, they have been richly memorialised. He tells us, 'Here stands a tall statue of a great Auk by US artist Todd McGrain, part of his Lost Bird Project' (p. xxvi). Could it be any more poignant than that: 'a proud bird, about my height, gazing mournfully out to sea' (p. xxvi) at Kirkjuvogur, towards its island home of Eldey.

The great tragedy highlighted in this book is that man alone claimed the lives of the last Auks on Earth. This was not the first time, and nor would it be the last time, that humans did something so reckless. But as Newton's legacy shows, remorse can yield a greater inheritance. Newton is remembered as a zoologist, but he is not remembered so much as an initiator of bird protection and the Game Park idea, and this is a mistake. Pálsson's book clearly narrates his journey post Eldey, that included a shift in consciousness and a greater understanding and reverence for lives other than humans. Others too, such as Gallivan (2012), Birkhead (2022), Nijhuis (2022) and Walliston (1921) have suggested that Newton's best work was his involvement in the Game Park idea, and having quotas set for hunting. A generation later in the United States of America, a young man called Aldo Leopold would also experience a self-transforming moment after culling wolves in wilderness as part of his job. Having killed a she-wolf, he watched the fire of life die in her eyes:

> I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view ([1949] 2001, p. 129).

Leopold was one of the initiators of the concept of protected wilderness areas or National Parks as they are now called, in the United States of America. He was part of the re-wilding of Yellowstone National Park, to return wolves – the keystone species – to the area to balance out the ecosystems. The Great Auks would not be so lucky. Yet here we have two examples of shifts in human consciousness that led from slaughter to reparative action, prescient of what we now call deep ecology. And Ketill, once returned from the last expedition, didn't hunt birds again. He developed a strong farming community and built churches for the people, perhaps a form of amends, recalibrating his moral compass, or as one local put it 'built to memorialize the events at Eldey in 1844'.

We owe Wolley and Newton a great debt for taking the trouble to note what they and others did before and around them. Furthermore, because anthropologists such as Pálsson – provoked in part by a moral responsibility as a scientist and as a citizen of Iceland to document this genealogy – we are called again to take

inventory about what ecocidal practices we have employed in the name of farming, agriculture, recreational hunting and seafaring, that no longer serve – that perhaps never served a sustainability consciousness. We are the agents of the Anthropocene, and its 'trajectory' (Steffen et al. 2015) and we have a lot to answer for. Pálsson couldn't be any clearer about that, and hence succeeds in achieving a powerful educational and ethical impact. He should be applauded for this raw, yet at times elegiac handling of the story of the last Great Auk, and it is no surprise that the book has been shortlisted for the prestigious Royal Society of London Science Book Prize, 2024.

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